Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 20 Number 2 February 2023

FIELD TRIP-1: Sunday, 12th February 2023, 7.30AM: Manjira WLS. Meeting Point: Sangareddy Crossroads, Mumbai Highway, 7.00AM. Trip Coordinator(s): JVD Moorty (Mobile: 98494-70411)

Manjira WLS was originally a crocodile sanctuary developed to protect the vulnerable mugger crocodile, and is home today to about 100+ species of birds including winter migrants. The islands here have marshy fringes that act as nesting sites for aquatic birds; agricultural fields surround the reservoir.

This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required. Strict Covid protocols will be followed, so please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. Deccan Birders T-Shirts and caps will be available for sale.

HSBC Hyderabad Bird Race 2023

The **HSBC Hyderabad Bird Race 2023** event organized by Deccan Birders will begin **at 5:30am on Sunday, February 26, 2023**, at the Flag-off venue [**Hotel The Plaza, Tourism Plaza, Opp., Greenlands, Begumpet, Hyderabad**]. Please sign up and confirm your participation; also invite all your friends (Birders or not) who would be interested in spending the day out with birds!

Link to register –
https://forms.gle/DLtTVGFsvyGedsmk8

For any queries or clarifications, please contact the organizing team:

Gokul Krishna Addanki (99453-46585) / Gowthama Poludasu (94409-10967) / Sathwik Reddy (99858-07186)

Report: Birds of Wild Ass Sanctuary, Kutch, Gujarat, January 9-10, 2023

Text & Photos: Dr Krishna Nagarajan

A view of the flat barren lands at Wild Ass Sanctuary, Little Rann of Kutch

While planning a family trip to the White Desert at Dhordo, Kutch, we decided to make a pit stop at the Wild Ass Sanctuary on our way back to Ahmedabad. The sanctuary turned out to be a birding paradise and we ended up having our best bird-watching outing as a family, post Covid.

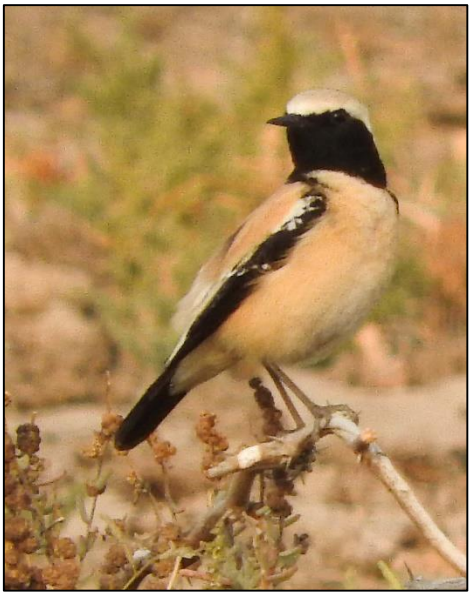
We stayed for a night at the Royal Safari Camp resort at Bajana, about 100 kilometres west of Ahmedabad. The resort provided a jeep safari trip as part of the package. Our plan was primarily to sight the Wild Asses at the Sanctuary and do whatever birding we could do along the way. A pair of binoculars, a birding camera, and a soft copy of Grimmett's 'Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent' are part of our travel checklist. After checking into the resort, we went for the evening safari of the Sanctuary. The jeep driver who was assigned to us, Mahboob, turned out to be an excellent bird-watching guide. He became excited when he realised that we were into bird-watching as well.

The Wild Ass Sanctuary is said to be spread around an area of 5000 sq km. We entered the sanctuary from the Bajana gate. Adjacent to the gate, you see a huge lake at the right. The water seems to be coming from the river Okaro Kharagoda, which terminates here by forming the lake.

As soon as we entered the gate and headed towards the lake shore, we came across a flock of Crested Larks and Wheatears.

Crested Lark

Hume's Wheatear



Desert Wheatear

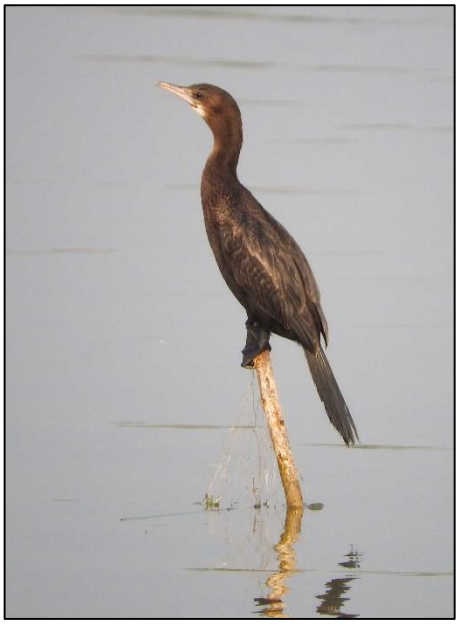
The lake was full of migratory and resident birds: Great White (or Rosy) Pelican, Greater Flamingo, Common Crane, Painted Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill and Greylag Goose.

Great White Pelican

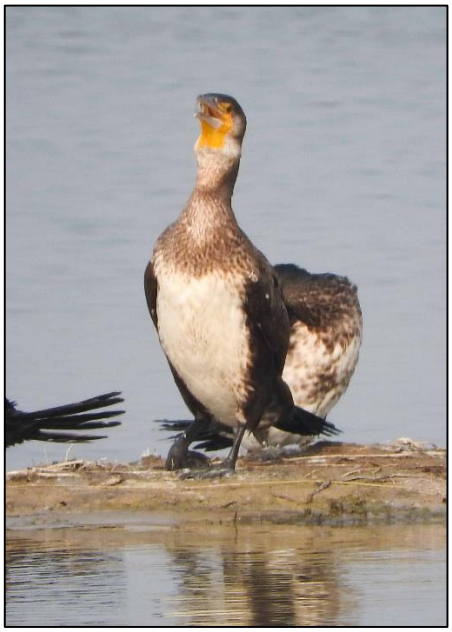
Common Crane

Greylag Goose

There were also good numbers of Northern Shoveler, Black-winged Stilt, Common Sandpiper, Little, Indian and Great Cormorants, Grey-headed Swamphen, Ruddy Shelduck, etc.



Little Cormorant



Great Cormorant

Ruddy Shelduck

It was interesting to see the Spoonbill fishing while walking around in the lake with its bill inside the water. It was also interesting the way the Greater Flamingos were swinging their necks left and right sieving through the water surface.

Eurasian Spoonbill

As you drive away from the lake towards the left, you immediately notice that the land is barren with hardly any vegetation. There are just a few shrubs here and there. The dry land is flat and full of cracks, apparently due to the abundance of the salt underground. We were told that during the rainy season, the whole area is flooded with water converting it into a wetland.

Eastern Imperial Eagle

Montagu's Harrier

So on one side, you have a lake full of migratory and resident birds, and on the other the land is completely flat and barren which makes it easy to sight the birds even if they are a 1000 metres away! This makes it a really fascinating and unique bird-watching location, especially for sighting the birds of prey.

Even after all these years of bird-watching, I find it difficult to properly identify the birds of prey. They are hardly seen sitting around to study them carefully. They don't flock either. The males and females can also differ significantly and identifying them in flight is even more confusing. Re-watching the 'Raptors' webinar by Deccan Birders is on my list of things to do.

Steppe Eagle

The best and the fun part of bird-watching at the Wild Ass Sanctuary was that you can sight the birds of prey such as the Steppe Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, etc, from a distance. They are usually sitting on the ground or on top of a shrub. Then you drive the jeep to a closer distance. They don't seem to care and hardly budge from their place. You get plenty of time to study the birds and take pictures to your heart's content!

Indian Wild Ass

As we started driving into the dry land, which is vast, we immediately ran into a herd of Indian Wild Asses. These are listed as "Near Threatened" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). I was surprised how healthy and strong they looked. In fact, they almost looked like a strong horse but shorter in height. Amazing.

Lesser Flamingo

Driving further into the Sanctuary, we reached the inner lake shores where we found a huge flock (more than 200) of Lesser Flamingos.

Sunset at Wild Ass Sanctuary

At the end of the safari as the sun was setting, we drove back to the lake to watch the sun set. It was made even more memorable, when we saw a solitary Black-necked Stork fishing in the lake. This was a first for us. After the sunset, we drove back to the resort, content and with the thought that the unexpected birding extravaganza made the overall trip something to remember for a long time.

Black-necked Stork

The full list of birds seen is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*	26	Ruddy Shelduck	*Tadorna ferruginea*
2	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	27	Northern Shoveler	*Anas clypeata*
3	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	28	Northern Pintail	*Anas acuta*
4	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*	29	Greylag Goose	*Anser anser*
5	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	30	Steppe Eagle	*Aquila nipalensis*
6	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*	31	Eastern Imperial Eagle	*Aquila heliaca*
7	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	32	Greater Spotted Eagle	*Aquila clanga*
8	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*	33	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*
9	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	34	Desert Wheatear	*Oenanthe deserti*
10	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	35	Black-necked Stork	*Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*
11	Little Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax niger*	36	Little Stint	*Calidris minuta*
12	Intermediate Egret	*Mesophoyx intermedia*	37	Lesser Flamingo	*Phoenicopterus minor*
13	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	38	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*
14	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucocephala*	39	Bay-backed Shrike	*Lanius vittatus*
15	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	40	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*
16	Western Reef Egret	*Egretta gularis*	41	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
17	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*	42	Eurasian Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*
18	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	43	Black-headed Ibis	*Threskiornis melanocephalus*
19	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	44	Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*
20	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*	45	Western Marsh Harrier	*Circus aeruginosus*
21	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	46	Montagu's Harrier	*Circus pygargus*
22	Common Kestrel	*Falco tinnunculus*	47	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*
23	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*	48	Laughing Dove	*Stigmatopelia senegalensis*
24	Great Egret	*Casmerodius albus*	49	Grey-headed Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*
25	Rosy Starling	*Pastor roseus*	50	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
51	Great White Pelican	*Pelacanus onocrotalus*	60	Eurasian Spoonbill	*Platalea leucorodia*
52	Dalmatian Pelican	*Pelecanus crispus*	61	Black-tailed Godwit	*Limosa limosa*
53	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	62	Indian Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*
54	Long-tailed Shrike	*Lanius schach*	63	Ashy-crowned Sparrowlark	*Eremopterix griseus*
55	Common Crane	*Grus grus*	64	Slender-billed Gull	*Chroicocephalus genei*
56	Demoiselle Crane	*Grus virgo*	65	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
57	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*	66	Common Sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*
58	White-eared Bulbul	*Pycnonotus leucotis*	67	Pallas's Gull	*Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus*
59	Greater Flamingo	*Phoenicopterus roseus*	68	Hume's Wheatear	*Oenanthe albonigra*

Some other photos taken during the trip:

Eurasian Collared Dove

Grey Francolin

Shikra

Slender-billed Gull

Pallas's Gull

Intermediate Egret

Common Kestrel

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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE MALAYAN KIND

Text & Photos: Umesh Mani

The Malayan Night Heron (*Gorsachius melanolophus*) has been in the news lately in Chennai, with sightings being reported from a couple of locations in quick succession. The first, was from Guindy National Park (GNP), which was not surprising given the thick forest/scrub habitat available there, and another was from the area surrounding a lake at a place called Manampathy.

After the first report from GNP, 3 of us (Chitra from Hyderabad, Manjula from Bengaluru, and I) made a visit to GNP on Jan 21, 2023, to try and get a look at the bird. It is not easy to get into GNP, but Chitra somehow managed to get permission, and off we went, all excited!

A roughly 4km walk later, we reached the location where it had been sighted the previous week. We were, of course, a little tired, but the anticipation of seeing the bird kept us going. But when we reached the spot, it began to sink in that this was going to be tough. The forest was really thick there – it was, of course, impossible to venture in – and we had perforce to bird from the trail only. So the bird really had to be at the edge of the patch, if we were to get a view.

Anyway, we walked around for a bit, searching for this enigmatic bird that, unlike most other herons, seems to be a solitary bird as well as a shy one – which basically means that it is difficult to locate!

After some time, we decided to walk ahead and explore other nearby parts of the forest – all of it was, after all, suitable habitat.

My first sighting of the Malayan Night Heron, back in 2017, had been at IIT campus, which is adjoining GNP. From my observations there, and from some reading, I knew that the Malayan Night Heron often frequents the underbrush in thick scrub forest, and not far from water. So we walked to a nearby lake, to see if the heron was hanging around there. Another long walk along the lake edges not yielding any result, we decided to move further on the trail, trying to check inside any mini-trail or opening that we could find.

Malayan Night Heron (Chennai, February 21, 2023)
(Photo: Dr Chitra Shanker)

And then it happened. We came upon a small gap in the shrubbery, and there it was, right in front of us, not more than 4-5 feet away. The bird was as startled as we were! Manjula and Chitra managed to fire off a few record shots, but being at the rear end of the group, I could only get a glimpse of the bird's rear as it took off and scooted from there.

I had been hoping to see it properly and get a few good photographs, of course. So I was slightly deflated, but I can't say I was too disappointed – at least we did see it, and more importantly, it was a lifer for Manjula & Chitra.

Another long walk later, we were sitting around breakfast and talking about the Malayan Night Heron, and my mind went back to my first sighting at IIT. Susy, who lives inside the IIT campus and is an excellent birder, had been kind enough to enable my entry into the campus.

That day too, the heron kept to the thick scrub, and the location was such that we could just about manage to get a view of the bird – the next photo will give an idea what the location was like.

Malayan Night Heron (Chennai, February 12, 2017)
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

From across a small stream adjoining the site, inside a temple premises, precariously balanced up on a wall, half-bent to avoid the overhanging branches, I somehow managed to get a few photos… it was quite a circus.

Malayan Night Heron (Chennai, February 12, 2017)
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

However, though it kept a watchful eye on us, maybe the bird took pity on us, because at least it gave us time.

And after a while, when we decided to wind up and move back, the bird too changed its location and came a little closer to the road!

I was able to find a small gap through which I could get a few photos, and was much satisfied at the unobstructed view, and grateful for the opportunity to see a bird that is generally quite difficult to find.

I realised that I had been more than a little fortunate!

Malayan Night Heron (Chennai, February 12, 2017)
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(From Instagram, February 9, 2022)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*)

Marsh Sandpiper (Chennai, February 11, 2023)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Scolopacidae
Genus: *Tringa*
Species: *T. stagnatilis*
Size: 22-25 cm

Description & distribution: The Marsh Sandpiper is a small-sized member of the Tringa genus of sandpipers and shanks. It breeds in the open grassy steppe and taiga grasslands from the eastern parts of Europe, across to the far eastern parts of Russia, and winters mainly in Africa, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, with some populations going all the way to South-east Asia and Australia.

The Marsh Sandpiper resembles a smaller, more elegant version of the Common Greenshank, with a long, dark, fine bill, greenish or yellowish legs, and greyish upperparts that turn a muted greyish-brown or light brown during breeding season. The upperparts also show fine mottling with delicately coloured feathers, some diffuse brown spotting on neck and breast, and irregular barring on flanks. Forehead, sides of the head, supercilium, lower back and rump are pure white in winter. Irises are black. In flight, it shows a distinctive white wedge up its back, and the legs extend well past the tail tips. Sexes are alike.

Habitat & behaviour: The Marsh Sandpiper is usually seen singly or in small flocks, usually interspersed with other sandpipers and shanks. It favours the swampy edges of lakes, streams and creeks, as well as freshwater or brackish ponds, *jheels*, paddy fields, aquaculture ponds, etc, and less often in tidal mudflats and estuaries. It feeds by moving along, randomly pivoting in semi-circles, and picking its prey with its bill. Its diet consists mainly of insects and their larvae, worms, crustaceans, snails, shrimp and small frogs and fish. Its call is a melodious, repetitive *tuee-u, tuee-u* or a shrill piping *che-weep che-weep*, uttered while taking off.

Nesting: The Marsh Sandpiper breeds generally between April and June in most of its breeding range. It is monogamous and breeds in loose colonies. The typical nest is a shallow cup-shaped depression built on a mound on grassy or marshy lake edges. The usual clutch consists of 2-4 pale buff eggs with heavy mottling. Incubation is carried out by both parents.

Local name: The Marsh Sandpiper is known as *'Chhota gotra'* in Hindi, *'Biler balubatan'* in Bengali, *'Chhanbhi chaha'* in Punjabi, *'Gandapug tutvari'* or *'Nani lilapag tutvari'* in Gujarati, *'Chikhli tutvari'* in Marathi and *'Cheeti ullan'* in Tamil.

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